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Chaos in the Promiseland: Mentorship as Partnership in Undergraduate Research

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Introduction Part One

Undergraduate Research is premised on faculty expertise as, in part, a foundational element of mentorship. But what happens when a faculty mentor has little expertise and marginal control over the site of mentorship? This essay, co-authored by a faculty mentor and student writer/researchers, examines a three-week undergraduate research trip to Israel where the mentor and mentees were united in their limitations on the journey—limitations both scholarly and geographical. We are Lee Torda, Assistant Professor of English and Writing Program Administrator at Bridgewater State University; Marjorie Howe, undergraduate English major with a concentration in writing at BSU and Kirsten Ridlen, a 2015 graduate of BSU with a major in English.

The word ‘essay’—and the production of essays was the ultimate goal of the work we undertook together—comes from the French *essayer* or “to try.” It doesn’t mean to know. Not knowing meant we were all open to what the others can teach us and that is a true measure of partnership. It was easy for Lee to forget that Undergraduate Research is also premised on discovery and risk, and to model the ups and downs of these aspects of scholarly work is not easy to do authentically in the space of the classroom or even the mentor/mentee relationship sometimes (particularly in the creative arts and humanities). Despite heartburn and grey hair (almost entirely, but not exclusively, Lee’s), our trip to the Promised Land created just such a setting and circumstance. Risking partnership with student scholars/writers to create authentic, vivid research and writing opportunities through travel meant that both mentor and mentee (s) came away with a willingness to trust that the story will out despite difficulty, despite missteps, despite chaos—or perhaps entirely because of all of it.

While the experience presented many challenges for all involved, what arose out of the chaos of the experience were important lessons in exactly the threshold concepts the research trip was designed to help students to master—and that became the challenges for all of us: to manage our fear-to-risk (as writers and travelers), develop stamina for research and writing, and treat the writing work of the trip in a responsible, thoughtful, committed way. At the heart of the experience is this truth: that not knowing can become a catalyst for mentor and students to be partners in research.

Introduction Part Two: Managing the Landscapes of Student/Mentor Partnerships

Lee: I was hesitant to undertake an undergraduate research abroad opportunity because I don’t have the connections to other countries that many of my colleagues who routinely do research abroad and/or design study away opportunities for students have. I have no real impetus for research abroad—Composition and Rhetoric is not always a field that translates internationally (though it is starting to), but I worked with a remarkable group of students in a nonfiction writing workshop and offered to mentor a project of our collective design in order to take advantage of a (remarkable) program at our institution that pays for three weeks of undergraduate research abroad for a faculty mentor and up to four undergraduate students. The program is a part of a thriving Office of Student Research, a program fully funded in house.

The first way in which the students and I became partners was in choosing our site. The students weighed the various options for travel and, as a group, decided on Israel. The reasons were varied: one student, Margie, who is Jewish by birth, wanted to better understand a place she felt simultaneously intimately connected to and mysteriously disconnected from; one student opted for Israel out of distaste for the other sites; but all of the students selected the country because it was, as Kirsten would eventually write, “the farthest away—geographically and culturally—from everything I (we) already know.”

While it initially seemed like we would have the support and backing of both our home university and our partner institution in Haifa, it became clear quickly that this brand new partnership between the two universities was not as fully articulated as we needed it to be. We were unseasoned travelers to this part of the world, limited in our knowledge of the country in every way. For me, as the presumed mentor to these students, my dilemma was this: I didn’t know how to proceed. I lost my sense of what I understood as my own skill set, what I was bringing to the table. Thus, the second way in which I became a partner was that I, like the students, had no experience in this part of the world.

Tickets and hotel rooms for the cities we had chosen as a group were booked and paid for by the university, but we were on our own to determine everything else about our itinerary, to figure out how we would get from city to city, how we would move and function within each location. And it is here that our partnership started to unfold in practice. I had to be forthright about my limitations in terms of knowledge of the country. And that led all of us, me, Margie, Kirsten and our other two traveling companions, to partner to figure out how we could access people and places that would make each students’ travel narrative a successful one. It required all of us to pull in all markers, to talk to whomever we could find to help ourselves and our group members, and to serve as traveling partners for safety and second opinions.

Our challenge was to negotiate two landscapes. First, we needed most to simply navigate Israel, a country not suited to amateur travel even in the most peaceful spells. Secondly, we needed to negotiate the landscape of genre—travel narratives achieved through the methodology of anthropological ethnography.

A Few Preconditions for Partnership Abroad

Lee: As Margie and Kirsten allude to below, we all knew each other very, very well. We were all part of a near magical creative nonfiction workshop, and, additionally, these students were also advisees or students from previous classes. We knew each other well enough to trust each other. That trust formed the foundation for our successful partnership: I had faith that we were serious about all of this; my partners had faith that I wouldn’t let them down—or lose them or leave them; and we knew we could work together.

Margie: A word about trust in the context of partnership is in order at this point. As a non-traditional (old) student, I had known Lee since her first year at our university, and was taking a third writing course with her at the time she proposed the study-abroad trip. We had also worked on a directed study together, and our teacher/student relationship was well established. I trusted her guidance in my writing; she trusted my writer’s instincts. She taught me, through her unwavering support, to trust my own instincts, my own voice.

I am a fearful traveler. Terrified, in fact. As much as I grew to cherish the very idea of getting to see Israel, no other teacher on campus could have convinced me to actually fill out the application. No, Lee was not a tour guide. But the skills as writing mentor that she brought to Israel never faltered. In our writing journey, she was both mentor and partner.

Kirsten: By forging partnerships in mentoring Lee did not just agree to work alongside us students, but hoisted us up beside her. Throughout the conversations that formed our workshops, we became invested in the work of our group mates, and we began to understand each other as writers: our strengths and weaknesses, our habits and our concerns. And likewise we began to trust each other. And so through these individual partnerships that Lee had created, she also fostered a community of practice.

A question that often comes up in writing workshops is: “When can I call myself a Writer?” One thing I’ve come to notice about students who work with Lee is that, against the crippling insecurities of creative types, we’ve all come to regard ourselves, confidently, as Writers. Not aspiring writers, not maybe-someday-writers. And not because we feel that there’s nothing left to learn. We are Writers, because we are treated as Writers, and we do the work of Writers, and there is no longer any doubt in our minds that we are capable and worthy of the task.

Lee has built around her a community of Partners like ourselves, so that even upon meeting for the first time, we regard each other, too, as Writers and as kin. We support each other, and we ask about the work—already knowing it's been done, anticipating the obstacles each must have overcome to talk about our writing as we do: proud, excited, unfinished.

Riding Buses in Israel: Taking Risks as Writers and Travelers

Lee: There is a story I tell often about our trip, a story about riding buses in Israel. I spent an entire afternoon with Kirsten trying to locate the bus terminal in Haifa in order to figure out how to get from Haifa to Tel Aviv. According to the map in our guidebook as well as the GPS on my phone, the bus terminal should have been within walking distance of our hotel. But that was the old terminal, boarded up and abandoned. After a full afternoon of following one set of bad and misunderstood directions after another, approaching sundown on Shabbat, a kind bus driver in town loaded me and Kirsten onto his out-of-service bus and drove us the considerable distance to the actual bus station.

Eventually, in order to map out our trip around the country, I first had to locate information that should have been in any guidebook. Instead, I had to find the English Wikipedia page that listed the bus routes and providers in Israel; locate the Israeli Egged website, Google-translate that page, and then determine our riding options. Why was this so hard? I believe it was because guidebooks and the state of Israel didn't want American tourists on local buses that were being routinely blown up just a year before.

That was a lesson none of us was able to learn any other way than the way we learned it. And, in the end, that lesson was not one simply of geography or transportation. We learned a great deal about life in Israel. And it was emblematic of our entire trip: discovery required hard work, commitment, and no small amount of risk. It also became part of our narrative—our way of making sense of our experiences; a finding and an interpretation we co-experienced and co-created.

Kirsten: In traveling with four students to a foreign country for three loosely-planned weeks of research, Lee abdicated what control the classroom afforded her, instead transferring a fair share of it over to us. The Israeli landscape became our classroom, an even playing field on which we were each equally unpracticed, and as such much of our research was rooted in discovery. In order to do the work our various projects called us to, we needed to be open to the spontaneity of independent exploration, and Lee, perhaps against professional instincts to arrange a daily syllabus, allowed us that freedom.

Find your story. Be responsible. Come back alive. This became our collective mantra, and it was only partly a joke: Our first night in Israel I left my room key in the door. My roommate found it there the next morning and, the way she tells it, when Lee found out her heart actually stopped. Hand to her chest, glassy-eyed and choking-on-her-coffee kind of stopped. Maybe that was the moment she quit trying to convince herself that we had nothing to worry about.

Lee had to trust us to do the work our research required, to know our limits, and to use our heads. Of course she was always willing to join any one of us when we needed her. Our first night in Tel Aviv, the cultural hub of Israel, she and I walked, already exhausted, for hours along the neon lights of downtown looking for some authentic cultural music—the focus of my research—only to find a sampling of the same sort of pop music you would hear around Faneuil Hall. "That's research," she said. "Sometimes your leads are dead ends. You have to follow them anyway."

But there were times we had to test that theory on our own. Another group mate was researching the Israeli comedy scene, and somehow we found a Jerusalem comedy club that doubled as a karaoke bar. Had Lee seen it, I think if only out of custodial obligation she would have recoiled at the sight of dingy couches, questionable plumbing, and the faded though verifiable Danzig groupie who to this day remains the most intriguing character of our travels. And certainly there were times when we wondered if we had gotten in over our heads, and yet it was here that we found our story. A wealth of stories, in fact. And it was here, wondering if maybe getting in over our heads was worth it, relying on ourselves, that we felt most like writers.

Margie: On the Friday of our first week in Israel, I stepped outside of the Hotel Theodor in Haifa and walked in the late afternoon heat to the Arab Jewish Culture Center, ten minutes away, to see an exhibit of work by Arab Israeli artists. I decided to do this on my own. I was happy to be out walking on Shabbat eve, thinking my own thoughts; the streets were quiet as the people in the Jewish neighborhoods prepared for the Sabbath. Everyone in our travel group was anxious, wondering how and where and with whom we would be

researching our individual proposed topics. I was in Israel to investigate levels of religious observance, to understand what it means to Israeli Jews to say they are “secular,” for instance, or “Orthodox.”

That afternoon I met Germaine and Pierre, French émigrés who had been in Haifa for five years. I walked arm and arm with Germaine through the exhibit for over an hour, and learned about her family's persecution and escape from the Nazis. I asked Germaine if she believed she belonged in Israel as one of a “Chosen” people. “Oh, no, not that

Biblical nonsense,” she replied. “We are secular. This is where I feel safe from another Holocaust.”

The following week, on another solitary walk, in Tel Aviv, I met Rubin, an Iranian Jewish shop owner, whose family had paid drug smugglers to take him, at the age of fifteen in the 1980s, over the mountains into Turkey, because young boys were being taken to fight in the Iran-Iraq War. Rubin told me he is Orthodox, except that he does enjoy the occasional cheeseburger. “But never at home,” he laughed, “Never at home!”

These, among many others, were the stories and experiences I brought back to Lee for help to sort through my thoughts and make sense of it all and get at least embryonic drafts in place that would become a final essay. Lee got us where we were going. My role in the partnership was to open those hotel doors and step outside, go for a walk, meet people. And... write. A less chaotic, rigidly-structured, department-planned trip would not have forced me to do so.

Lee: Working with four students simultaneously, planning travel, keeping folks reasonably safe, I was largely exhausted most of the trip. I learned two things, though, out of necessity. I'm not as important as I imagine myself to be in the world of a student's project. They figure stuff out on their own. And I learned this: I don't need to be the expert, because scholarship is not about expertise as much as it is about tenacity.

All of the students involved in the experience showed great tenacity for the process of discovering their story. Tenacity can lead to expertise, but the process is exactly that, process. In the process of modeling tenacity for my students—as a traveler and as a writer—I saw students achieve greater understanding of both, as did I. Weeks, months, years after the trip these students owned their space as individuals and, in terms of threshold concepts, owned their space as writers: they produced text, revised text, and, perhaps most importantly, made the real effort to publish writing.

Kirsten bounded back from a rejection (that I know would have crushed her spirit previously) of her Israel piece to pursue a grant for research on the landscape of her home, New England, in relation to her trip to Israel. That work was published and you can read that piece, which includes writing she did in Israel, here: http://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev/vol10/iss1/25/. And I encourage you to read Margie's excellent published piece about Israel here: http://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev/vol9/iss1/14/. That is the real work of writing, the authentic experience of being a writer, of understanding the work of writing—and still doing it.

I was reminded, and vividly so, that the other real take away from undergraduate research is a focus on methodology, rather than content—what I call laying bear the mechanism. My real role came in developing structures to harness the energy students' discoveries created and figure out how to get that energy, those ideas, into writing without killing the very energy that brought us to that point. That lesson, of the give and take of the work, was vital to the creation of an equal partnership.

How to Manage the Chaos Productively

Margie: In thinking about other sorts of mentor/student partnerships at the university level, such as semester courses and directed studies, I know that there are institutional rules and structures to serve as guidelines, as scaffolding upon which to construct the entire learning endeavor. In their introduction to “One Year of Collaboration,” Schlosser and Sweeney (2015) reflect upon “how the form of the SaLT program” at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges “sustained tension between structure and freedom, providing guidelines to support our interactions, but also the flexibility to experiment.”

In our situation, we were working in an environment that was almost all experiment and almost no structure, and we all, mentor and student researchers, felt the anxious strain caused by such unbalanced tensions. All of us, together and individually, needed to figure out,

literally on the fly, what others expected of us, what we expected of ourselves, and how we were going to meet those expectations. We needed to figure out what exactly our partnership looked like, and how it would function.

The only structure imposed upon us by the system supporting our travel was that we maintain a blog of our journey. I came to lean on that blog, on the process of constructing those entries at 2:00 in the morning, in my hotel room, to be reviewed by Lee the next day, as if the writing process itself were supporting the roof over my head and providing the firm ground under my feet. Tapping away on a lit computer screen in a darkened room in the middle of the night was the way I did my writing at home; it felt like a normal thing for me, something that created a sense of order amid the chaos of travel.

Lee: Our sideways meetings as a small group, one-on-one sessions, discussions and management of the blog (including the tremendous stress for some of the students for producing and publishing posts), our writing and revision again and again for publication. Even our rejections. All of that contributed to a most authentic writing and research experience for each student and for me.

Kirsten: If Israel was our classroom, then our conference tables were cab rides, bus terminals, breakfasts and meandering walks. There was no formal arrangement to our relationships as students and mentor. We were not advised and scrutinized. We lived with the work every day and workshopped it casually through conversations fueled by mutual interest and investment in the stories and the shared experiences. As a group, we kept a blog about our trip, and agreed to take turns posting. You can read it here: <http://bsuinisrael.tumblr.com/>.

My first blog post was one of the most anxiety-inducing experiences of my life, or at least it felt like it at the time. I considered it an assignment, and I spent the day avoiding Lee at all costs. But as our work together continued (Lee posted along side us not over us), and we became partners in the work; we forged a trust that transcends insecurity. She understood me as a writer and I trusted her as a partner.

As students, we are not always used to that kind of freedom: to write what we want to write, to write and to speak honestly and candidly, rather than according to what is expected of us, and often we feel unfit to wield that kind of power. So the work becomes deeply personal, and the writer aptly vulnerable. This kind of work is only possible when student and mentor become partners and equal shareholders in the work—when the writer can hand her most sincere research over to their mentor and trust the mentor to understand both her and the work—to decipher the spirit of it. To trust that the mentor will not think it silly. To trust the self to be worthy of the work.

Riding Buses In Israel Redux: Lessons Learned

Lee: In the way that Margie, Kirsten, and I, each from our own perspective of this trip, describe above, this experience of letting go better prepared me to mentor—or partner with—other students who sought me out to work with me because of my methodology while working with students. Students want to work with me because of a rigorous focus on developing the habits of becoming a working writer. The act of production. The work of revision. The risk of critique and publication. What they bring to what I have come to call a mentoring partnership is their desire (not mastery) of content. After Israel, I believe I trust my students to find their way and am more patient with their individual processes for getting there.

Here is the other payoff of riding on buses in Israel: I learn something, too. I mean, very seriously, I know how to get around Israel by bus. But, as I said at the opening, this was a learning process about all kinds of geographies. Most recently, I oversaw two protracted research and writing honors theses, one creative and one scholarly, that involved intense investigation of young adult literature, a field I knew only as a reader, essentially an amateur's relationship to the genre. I was entirely frank with students about this fact, and we planned and read and wrote together to bring all of us to a new level of understanding, one approaching expertise. After two years of working with these students, I am now ready to propose an introductory writing workshop on writing for young readers.

We enter the academy as students first, and, presumably, as individuals who want to learn. But in the onslaught of professional responsibilities, this desire to keep learning is too often lost. We are too infrequently encouraged not to know, too often required to be the expert. It is easy to forget how generative chaos can be because chaos is uncomfortable, messy, unwieldy and unpredictable.

But, as Gadamer, reminds us, learning is not supposed to be easy or predictable, or comfortable (we shouldn't confuse learning with Disney World). Chaos, then, is a fair site for learning. This experience in Israel reminded me that to learn with my students, in partnership, is not a failure of talent and expertise but a truer model of professionalism as a writer, reader, thinker, and humanist than I might otherwise have been able to provide—an educational Promised Land.

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